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# Researchers Researching Research: 1st Bergen Assembly

Helena Vilalta

Tags: [Josef Dabernig](#)

No curators, but ‘convenors’. No artists, but ‘researchers’. Not a biennial, but an ‘assembly’. No exhibition galleries, but ‘institutes’. Presenting work by just under fifty participants in a series of modestly sized exhibitions scattered across eleven cultural venues, the first edition of the Bergen Assembly tried to avoid biennial-speak at all costs. There was no sight of the dilapidated industrial buildings that have become the signature of the many biennials proliferating across the world.<sup>1</sup> Nor was this a ‘global’ exhibition: the origin of the participants – mostly from Germanic, Scandinavian and Slavic territories – reflected instead the backgrounds of its Moscow-based organisers, Ekaterina Degot and David Riff.

Such slippery terminology is partly inherited from the constituent process of the Bergen Assembly itself, which kicked off in 2009 with the question ‘To biennial or not to biennial?’, addressed at the Bergen Biennial Conference and the publication *The Biennial Reader* (2010).<sup>2</sup> Judging by the name of the ensuing perennial exhibition, ‘Bergen Assembly – An Initiative for Art and Research’, the answer seems to have been ‘yes, but’: it was decided that Bergen would host not a biennial but a triennial, and one that was not about art but about (or rather, for) art and research. For its first edition, curators Degot and Riff used a literary conceit to question the focus of the triennial itself: the vogue term ‘artistic research’. Their project, ‘Monday Begins on Saturday’, was titled after the eponymous 1964 Russian science-fiction novel by Arkadi and Boris Strugatski, described in its first English edition as ‘a bestseller on the other side of the Curtain, written by two Soviet scientists ... about the top secret, well-guarded institute in Solovetz where the most interesting research is done to harness the power of black magic ... and the secrets of super-science and paranormal talents!’<sup>3</sup> A tale about the fictional Institute of Witchcraft and Thaumaturgy, the novel is set against the background of the Cold War struggle for cultural, technological and economic supremacy, and uses the fantastical to craft a satirical comment on the secrecy, bureaucracy and inefficacy of Soviet socialism at the time.

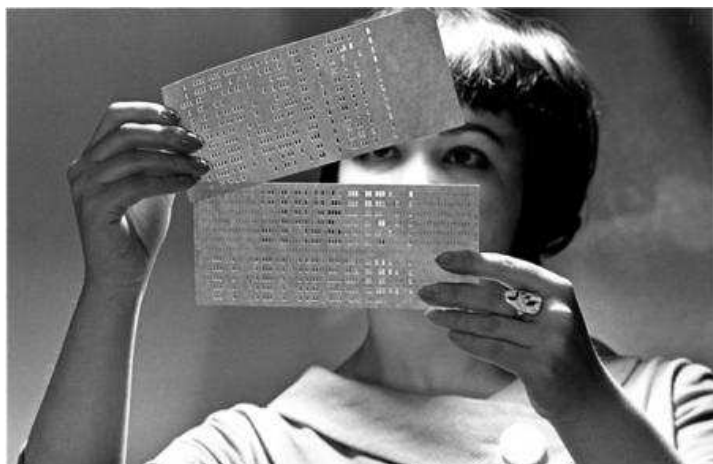


Ilya Kabakov, Painting #349, Charles Rosenthal: *They Are Discussing the New Plan* (1930), 1988, from Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *An Alternative History of Art*, 1998, ballpoint pen, adhesive tape, oil on canvas, 123.8 x 174.2 x 5 cm. Photograph: Nils Klinger. Courtesy Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, Long Island

Far more than just a reference point, the novel acted as a catalyst for the exhibition, with the artistic strategies here convened mirroring to a great extent the literary devices deployed by the Strugatski brothers – namely in the use of irony, fiction and narrative to speculate on present social, cultural and economic conditions. The parallels with the novel were also emphasised in the curatorial packaging of the exhibition: the host galleries (all existing cultural venues) were renamed as similarly ironically titled research institutes (ranging from the Institute of Imaginary States to the Institute of Defensive Magic or

the Institute of Perpetual Accumulation), all welcoming visitors with austere décor vaguely reminiscent of a bureaucrat’s office – a plant, an electronic clock and a copper plate engraved with an excerpt from the novel. If the Strugatski brothers used the figure of the pseudo-scientific researcher as a trope to criticise the atrophies of the Soviet political system, Degot and Riff examined the paradoxical relationship between artistic research and the neoliberal backdrop against which the term has gained momentum in Norway and Europe more generally over the past decade. Hovering over the exhibition, then, was the question of to what extent artistic research – the product par excellence of today’s post-social-democratic European art academies and public galleries – can lobby an effective critique of the system that nurtures it.<sup>4</sup>

It is not easy to translate such abstract questions into a cohesive exhibition narrative, let alone weave them into a curatorial premise based upon a literary conceit. Perhaps in order to face such a challenge, 'Monday Begins on Saturday' branched out to include not only the processes of artistic research but also its many objects: the accumulation of both knowledge and life as capital; 'the magic of the state' and the rituals of power;<sup>5</sup> 'tropical fascism', or the resurgence of fascist symbols in Latin-American gay subcultures; the connections between scientific and military research; and the entanglement of affect and technology, to name a few. Each topic was addressed in a different exhibition (loosely connected to the remit of the hosting venue) and as a result both the concept and the experience of the triennial were relatively atomised, with thematic groupings at times overshadowing aesthetic connections between the works.



Yakov Khalip, *Mayan Language Unraveled. Punch Cards*, 1962, silver gelatin print, 30 x 40cm. Courtesy Bergen Assembly

Setting up a comparison between the Strugatskis' fantastical researcher and today's artist as researcher, the Bergen Kunsthall (renamed the Institute of the Disappearing Future) came closest to the curators' stated aim to rewrite the novel in space and time.<sup>6</sup> This meant that references were often carried over quite literally into the exhibition, as in the pairing of 1960s archival black-and-white photographs of Soviet researchers with Kiluanji Kia Henda's *Icarus 13* (2008), a series of eight colour

photographs that, together with an architectural model and a wall text, re-signify the everyday landscape of Luanda (a rocket-shaped concrete monument, workers at a construction site, a green-tinted sky) to narrate a fictional account of an Angolan mission to the sun; or in the excerpts from socialist science-fiction films from the Eastern Bloc that led the way to Pelin Tan and Anton Vidokle's parody of (or inside joke on) the art world in their science-fiction video *2084* (2011–13). Other works in this venue counteracted such nostalgia for a future-long-past with more sceptical, if fairly didactic, reflections on the language of utopia and its marketability. Minze Tummescheit and Arne Hector's double-screen documentary *Fictions and Futures – Happiness in the Abstract* (2013), for example, seamlessly adopts the style of investigative journalism to portray the future as a financial product to be speculated upon. In Ivan Melnychuk and Oleksandr Burlaka's (Grupa Predmetiv) installation *Island* (2013), on the other hand, imagery of utopian buildings is juxtaposed with an architectural model and a written letter, set sometime in the future, in which an urban planner recounts to his or her 'lord and master' (an oligarch, we presume) the progress of his megalomaniacal project to transform a public island in central Kiev into a fortified private city, thereby hinting at a future that might resemble a feudal past.

'Monday Begins on Saturday' was at its best when it strayed farthest from its literary source. Of all the venues, the Institute of Anti-Formalism (housed at Kode4, a municipal art historical museum) most firmly anchored the aesthetic and conceptual concerns of the exhibition with a sophisticated analysis of the long shadow academicism has cast over artistic practice across different political regimes and historical periods. Archival displays narrated the reverse trajectories of two public sculptures on either side of the Iron Curtain, charting their transformation from autonomous sculpture to social memorial and vice versa: Jack Ward's abstract steel sculpture *Detroit 1967* (1974–77), which has long stood as a monument to the 1967 riots in the city's imaginary because of its location where the rebellion started, even though it was conceived and commissioned as a modernist sculpture with no connection to that site;<sup>7</sup> and Ada Rybachuk and Volodymyr Melnychenko's figurative relief *Wall of Memory* (1968–82) for a cemetery in Kiev, which was effaced shortly before completion for not complying with Socialist Realist doctrine, leaving behind a concrete undulating wall that now recalls modernist aesthetics. Elsewhere iconographic studies by Polish avant-garde artist Władysław Strzemiński from the early 1950s, which combine Socialist Realist motifs with geometric abstraction, and intricate 1970s text drawings by East German artist





Wladislaw Strzemiński, *The Hands: A Study for Harvesters*, 1950, gouache and pencil on paper, 34 x 32cm. Photograph: J. Gladyskowski. Collection of Pitor Nowicki, Warsaw. Courtesy Polish Modern Art Foundation



Ane Hjort Guttu, *Untitled (The City at Night)*, 2013, video, colour, sound, 25min, still. Courtesy the artist and Bergen Assembly

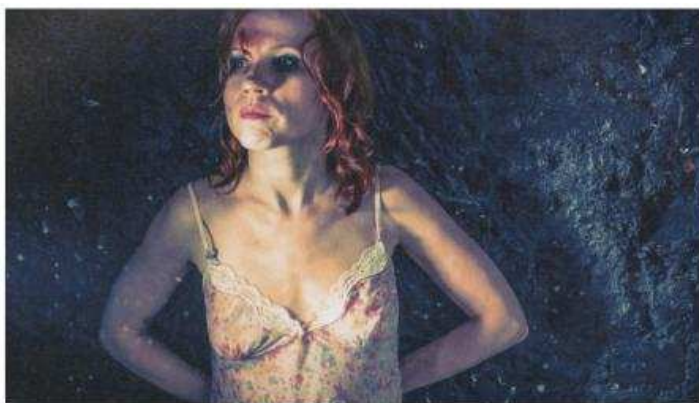
Carlfriedrich Claus invoked a long history of artistic resistance to the representational dogmas of state socialism.

Speaking to today's perhaps less rigid but still prevalent academicism, the work of the Norwegian artist Ane Hjort Guttu updated the exhibition's reflection on the dangers of aesthetic doctrine – or what we might want to call 'policy' today. Each of Guttu's three works on display could be seen to speculate on a tripartite typology of the artist: the academic, the untrained and the researcher. The latter is the object of her video *Untitled (The City at Night)* (2013), one of the many works specially commissioned for the triennial, in which she interviews an anonymous artist whose twenty-year-long research project consists of thousands of colourful 'scores' in the tradition of geometric abstraction, which are meant to depict the underworld of the city at night. Within 'Monday Begins on Saturday', the misalignment of (social) content and (modernist) form in the anonymous artist's work acted as a witty comment on the pitfalls of well-intended but toothless critical practice, in which social reality is abstracted to the point of losing any connection to its referent, and art becomes not only autonomous from the context in

which it exists but also indifferent to its audience.

Guttu's portrayal of the artist as a delirious researcher who has lost touch with reality effectively broadened the terms of the discussion to raise questions that reached far beyond volatile terminology, hinting at a more deep-seated crisis regarding the role of art and culture in society. On view at the artist-run space KNIPSU (renamed the Institute of Love and the Lack Thereof), alongside two other new commissions, Ketī Chukhrov's filmed theatre play *Love Machines* (2013) was perhaps most ambitious in using the form of science fiction not to comment on specific political or aesthetic issues, but to portray instead a crisis of affect in which we are all entangled. Performed on a bare stage, with minimal props and costumes, Chukhrov's play revolves around two bio-robots, or 'love machines', programmed to instrumentalise desire to disturbing effect, with a cow the only remaining redoubt of human emotions such as love and compassion. In invoking the post-Fordist 'managed heart',<sup>8</sup> *Love Machines* alluded to the much-discussed conflation of labour and life, which also resonates strongly in the title of the exhibition, but crucially it did so by reflecting on how life is lived rather than classified and theorised.

Shown in another three-artist exhibition at the School Museum (a museum focusing on the history of

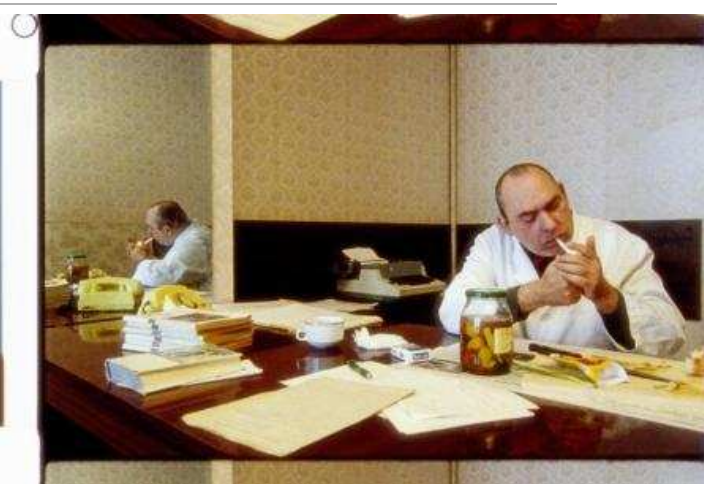


Ketj Chukhrov, *Love Machines*, 2013, HD video, colour, sound, 48min, production photographs. Courtesy the artist and Bergen Assembly

‘...it was difficult not to read Dabernig’s mothballing institute as a not-so-distant dystopian cultural horizon, in which scraggy artists will become the patients, rather than guests, of an inflated institutional machinery oiling its cogs for no purpose other than its own subsistence.’

the ominous sound of Verdi’s ‘Messa da Requiem’ accompanying their scarce, sluggish movements. In the context of the triennial, it was difficult not to read Dabernig’s mothballing institute as a not-so-distant dystopian cultural horizon, in which scraggy artists will become the patients, rather than guests, of an inflated institutional machinery oiling its cogs for no purpose other than its own subsistence.

*Hypercrisis* pinpointed the problem of



Josef Dabernig, *Hypercrisis*, 2011, 35mm film, colour, sound, 17min, still. Courtesy the artist; Galerie Andreas Huber, Vienna; and Wilfried Lentz, Rotterdam

Norwegian education and society and renamed the Institute of Lyrical Sociology for the show), Josef Dabernig’s *Hypercrisis* (2011) also depicts a world in decline in which emotion has become a pathological condition. Set in a former recreation home for Soviet film-makers in Armenia, whose modernist architecture in decay evokes a glorious past long gone, the film portrays a poet in the midst of writer’s block set against the backdrop of a lethargic institution populated by white-coat-clad bureaucrats. Handheld shots of the anguished writer wandering in the woods, manuscript in hand, to the rhythm of the insistent, jittery drum pattern of CAN’s 1971 ‘Halleluhwah’ alternate with long, steady portraits of the idle administrators comfortably passing time in the residence’s once luxurious interiors,

institutionalisation that arises when art is bound up with an understanding of research as a quantifiable and measurable activity. Considering the multiplication of institutes in the show, however, it was surprising that this film was alone in questioning the consequences of couching artistic practice within an institutional setting. This also contrasted with the critique of ‘artistic research’ articulated in the discourse surrounding the exhibition, with Degot asking at the two-day symposium held during the

opening of the show, for example, whether ‘art as research’ had become synonymous with the ‘institutionalisation of critique’.<sup>9</sup> With the curators rightly identifying institutionalisation as one of the pitfalls of ‘artistic research’, one would have expected questions of self-organisation and institutional creativity to follow suit. Sadly, however, these issues weren’t addressed in most of the works included or

the curatorial grammar of the show.

To be sure, to fully answer the question of institutionalisation may well be beyond a single exhibition's reach. However, for all the richness and diversity of its content, 'Monday Begins on Saturday' resulted in quite a uniform image of the artist as researcher, if not in the object of its investigation, at least in the tools of its trade. With some notable exceptions, the prevalence of video-essays leaning strongly on voice-over or written text left one wishing the exhibition had done more to question shared assumptions of what artistic research is, instead of reflecting a relatively narrow vision of research-based practices that is already at risk of becoming a style. Ultimately such a monochromatic portrait of the artist as researcher acted as a call to consider how artistic research can avoid falling prey to the standardisation that an increasingly corporate academic and institutional landscape risks bringing about – an invitation especially relevant to those of us who, like Degot and Riff, still prefer art's fraught marriage to the academy and the state to its complicity with the market.

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## Footnotes

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1. Although two of the eleven venues were indeed sited in former industrial buildings, these have long been repurposed as cultural institutions, a sign that Norway's second-largest city is in little need of a contemporary art event to boost its desirability in the eyes of either investors or tourists. The two venues were Bergen Kjøtt, a former meat factory that was converted into studios for artists and musicians in 2010, and USF Verftet, a former cannery that has functioned as a cultural venue since 1993. USF Verftet also hosted a two-day symposium that took place from 31 August until 1 September 2013 to coincide with the opening of the Bergen Assembly. ↑
2. See Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø (ed.), *The Biennial Reader*, Bergen and Ostfildern: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz, 2010. ↑
3. See the back cover of Arkadi and Boris Strugatski, *Monday Begins on Saturday* (1964, trans. Leonid Renen), New York: Daw Books, 1977. ↑
4. For an exchange of views on what 'artistic research' means, see the recording of the panel discussion 'Artistic Research in Embattled Institutions', held on 31 August 2013 during the opening symposium of 'Monday Begins on Saturday' at USF Verftet, Bergen, available at <http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/38044943>. ↑
5. See Michael Taussig, *The Magic of the State*, New York: Routledge, 1997. ↑
6. The back cover of the exhibition's publication, for example, states: 'The project – which takes the form of an exhibition and a book – imagines a contemporary rewriting of the novel as an archipelago of fictitious research institutes.' See Ekaterina Degot and David Riff (ed.), *Monday Begins on Saturday* (exh. cat.), Berlin and Bergen: Sternberg Press and Bergen Assembly, 2013. ↑
7. The documents on the story of the sculpture displayed at 'Monday Begins on Saturday' are part of Aeron Bergman and Alejandra Salinas's research project *Monument to Rebellion* (2007–13). ↑
8. See Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983. ↑
9. During the symposium Degot and Riff argued that the conceptual framework of the exhibition was inspired by the thought of humanist materialist philosophers such as Mikhail Lifshitz. While the discussions offered some insight into this school of thought, the format of the opening symposium proved ill-suited for a proper philosophical discussion, especially since these

## Comments

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references were often new to the mostly Norwegian and Western European audience and would have necessitated further unpacking. A continuation of these conversations in a more suitable forum would, however, seem very worthwhile. ↑